

Put On the Armor of Light

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2021

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36; Psalm 25:1-9

Sermon text: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen. Collect for Advent 1*

I hope you all had a festive Thanksgiving—we all have much to be thankful for, certainly. But today marks a turning of the page, a new year for the church. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a season in which we prepare for the coming of the Lord, whom we believe comes twice, as our opening Collect puts it, “now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility” and “in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead.”

At this time of year the weather reporter on NPR notes that the time of sunrise and sunset represents a decrease of daylight of two minutes and some seconds, a countdown of diminishing daylight until the winter solstice. Almost as reliably, the rest of the news provides reasons to feel a corresponding feeling of foreboding about the future of our country and the world. Add in the first wave effects of climate change—and looming catastrophe— and it begins to sound like the signs in heavens and distress on earth, confusion and roaring, sea rise and earth quake, fire and flood that Jesus tells the disciples are the sign of the coming day of judgment. So the gospel for today on first reading does not sound like very good news.

But signs of the end are also, we believe as Christians, signs of the second coming—signs therefore not altogether negative. As Jesus says, although “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” those who have faith in God and look with hope to the second coming of Jesus should “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

So let’s take a moment to stand up if you are able and raise your head and hands—because your redemption is drawing near. A good stretch. Deep breath. Release the fear, embrace the hope.

Or, as we prayed in the words of our opening Collect, God give us grace to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

So... make as if throwing off a dark cloak. Good. But now you feel a little exposed to the elements—and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. So pretend to be putting on a suit of armor, the armor of light. Hmm. What does that look like? Let's sit down and consider what that could be in this day and age.

I am going to invite you into a short guided meditation. But before I do let me talk about guided meditation and contemplative prayer for a moment. Nowadays guided meditations are very popular. I have an app on my phone which provides a beautiful singing bowl sound at the beginning and end of my morning meditation. The app also has hundreds of teachers offering guided meditations and music to assist in getting a quiet mind and a peaceful spirit. Many aim to help listeners release anxiety and fear and embrace compassion and self confidence. A lot are influenced by forms of eastern religion, yoga, Buddhism, with a syncretic mix of influences from western traditions and new age innovations. No doubt you all have some experience in this sort of thing.

Of course contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition is also easily found—for we have many deep traditions that go back to the first centuries of Christianity, to the Ammas and Abbots of the desert and later the monasteries of east and west. Such prayers as the Eastern Orthodox Jesus Prayer, or the more recently developed centering prayer. There is also the guided imagery of Ignatian spiritual exercises—a short form of which I will lead in a moment. The main distinction of Christian forms of contemplative practice is not in the intention—to attain inner peace, courage and purpose—but in as it were the added dimension: looking not only to the individual heart and mind, for inner light and enlightenment, and not only to the cosmic dimension for a sense of the pattern, beauty and ultimate unity manifest in nature, but also—and this is most important—to God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, and the Holy Spirit, the giver of life and inspiration and power to connect us to God, and to Jesus our brother and teacher and redeemer.

Okay, with this in mind let us formulate an intention for our meditation and prayer: to cast off darkness and fear and put on the armor of light and hope. Let us do so in the faith that it is not only by our will and power we seek this but through the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of Jesus.

Ready? First, close your eyes. It is dark. It is quiet. Small sounds of breathing, or equipment, or rustling and coughs can be heard. But you are quiet, in the midst of others also quietly breathing. You feel your body in the hard pew, your feet on the floor, bottom on the cushion, back against the wood. But your mind is now

ascending, your mind's eye is traveling up from the place your body is, through the sky, into the clouds and then above the clouds. You see the sun, so bright, but even so you can also see the moon and so many stars such as you have never seen except in NASA imagery. Galaxies, planets, supernovas. It is all amazingly beautiful. Take it in. But now turn your attention downward and look at the green blue sapphire of earth. Swirling clouds are moving over land and sea—with here and there flashes of lightning. It is stunningly beautiful. And now let's descend closer. Picture yourself in your mind's eye descending toward New York City—and you see millions of people rushing about, working, sleeping, playing. You feel a welling of compassion for them—for they seem so wrapped up in narrow concerns and limited possibility, and are so vulnerable. But you also see time present and time past and time future—for you see with God's loving eye, that all will be well and all manner of thing will be well. In the end. That although troubles will come, and darkness and storms and death, the sun will rise again, the earth will be newly born, and all the cosmos will emerge into new life.

With this cosmic picture in mind and heart you come back into your body and realize you need to put on the armor of light. This is not in order to battle others, to defeat the enemies of God. No swords needed just now. The armor is to shield you against the darkness. It is like a force field around you, a shimmering aura or nimbus. Your body will continue to feel pain and pleasure, work well or not so well. But your self, you as a living soul, a combination of physical body and mind, and the breath of life that is Spirit, is safe. No harm can touch it. No insults can stain it. No sins cannot be cleansed by forgiveness, given and received. You are held in the palm of God's hand even if the world collapses around you. You know this now. You realize that Jesus also felt the pain and suffering of this life—but never lost the connection to God, his faith and hope. He rose from the dead and will come again. When we do not know. The end will come unexpectedly. But that is alright. We are safe in the armor of light.

Let me conclude with part of the prayer Paul wrote for the Thessalonians: May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

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